

Prologue

The Lavon affair ("Esek Habish" - the shameful affair) was one of the most bizarre chapters in Israeli history. In 1954, the Israeli secret service set up a spy ring in Egypt, with the purpose of blowing up US and British targets. The operation was code-named "Susanah." The terrorist hits were to be blamed on the regime of Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, with the purpose of alienating the US and Britain from Egypt and Nasser and somehow preventing Egyptian nationalization of the Suez canal. The ring was discovered. Strict censorship ensured that that the Israeli public officially knew little or nothing of the affair for many years. Names were not mentioned, the affair was called "Esek Bish" - the affair of shame, and key protagonists were referred to as "X" and "the third man." Unofficially and through leaks, most people knew at least the outlines of the affair.

No ingredient was omitted that could make this affair a totally morally repugnant fiasco. The affair occurred during a difficult time in Israel. Terrorist raids on Israel and reprisals had provoked a public debate about the efficacy of reprisals. [David Ben-Gurion](#), the founding Prime Minister, had retired to his kibbutz, Sde Boker, in September 1953 claiming fatigue and age. In October 1954, an Israeli reprisal raid in Qibieh, in the West Bank, lead by Ariel Sharon, had miscarried, resulting in the death of 69 civilians. An acrimonious debate was kindled between "activists" who advocated continuing such raids, and doves, led by PM Sharett, who were against them. It was presumed that the "activists," proteges of Ben Gurion, and in particular [Moshe Dayan](#) who was IDF Chief of Staff, initiated the operation on the orders of Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion, on the other hand, disowned Defense Minister Lavon, and claimed that Lavon had given the orders. The left wing of the Labor party adopted the cause of Lavon. The right adopted the cause of Ben Gurion, [Shimon Peres](#) and [Moshe Dayan](#). Nothing definite could ever be proven.

The prisoners of the Lavon affair remained forgotten in Egyptian jails, and were not exchanged after the Sinai campaign. Since they were mostly Sephardi Jews, their cause became a cause celebre of those who claimed that Israel, and in particular the Mapai party, discriminated against Sephardi Jews.

The arrest of the ring resulted in an affair that dominated Israeli politics for over a decade. Israel was embarrassed, as it had been caught trying to harm American and British interests for no reason and in instigating terror attacks against innocent targets. The spies who were not executed were left to rot in Egyptian jails. Meanwhile, a wave of persecution forced the emigration of tens of thousands of Jews from Egypt, leaving behind property, memories and roots. Investigations in Israel led to a trail of forged documents and perjured testimony, as everyone involved tried to implicate others. To all of the above would be added the ignominy of betrayal, as it became evident eventually that Israeli agent Avri Seidenberg (Avri Elad) had probably betrayed the operation to the Egyptians.

The spy ring was not run by the Israeli Mossad intelligence service, but rather by unit 131 of AMAN (IDF intelligence). The rationale behind creation of this group was that they would be local sleeper agents, trained in various techniques, who would remain in place and be activated only in case of war. At some point, someone decided, for unknown reasons, to activate the ring without waiting for war.

In those days the intelligence services were comparatively inexperienced, under budgeted and unprofessional, though the Mossad was to achieve notable success, mainly through luck, such as obtaining a copy of the twentieth party congress speech of Soviet Premier Krushchev. Israeli intelligence

was easy to infiltrate. They had a relatively low opinion of intelligence services of Arab countries and were therefore not on their guard. Their vetting procedures for new agents were poor. Soviet and other intelligence agencies also had no little trouble recruiting agents among new immigrants.

The Egyptian spies were poorly compartmentalized. They were not trained to resist torture. The operation was not compartmentalized: the spies knew each other's identities. Thus, there was a danger that under interrogation, any one of them could betray the entire group. Worse, it is now believed that in fact they were betrayed by the Israeli agent in charge of the operation. The sensational revelations about the spy ring endangered the entire Egyptian Jewish community, which numbered about 50,000, as well as the credibility of Israel.

The Ring

The Egyptian Jews known to have been recruited for the spy ring were:

Shmuel Azar

Yosef Carmon

Victor Levy

Dr. Moshe Marzouk

Meir Meyuhas

Robert Dassa

Phillip Nathanson

Marcelle Ninio

Meir Za'afra

There may have been others, including an additional Israeli agent. They were recruited and trained by Avraham Dar, an Israeli agent who went by the name of John Darling, supposedly a British businessman. They were flown to France and then to Israel and trained in use of explosives.

Dar's ring was handed over to Avraham Seidenberg, who had Hebraicized his name to Avri Elad. Elad had a shady past. He had gotten in trouble with the IDF in 1948 for looting a refrigerator from an Arab house, and had been reduced in rank to private. Shimon Peres claims that Elad was a crook even as a young member of Kibbutz Alumot. Peres was then treasurer of the Kibbutz, and he relates that Elad pilfered the contents of Peres's wallet, which had cash to be used for Kibbutz purchases (Peres, p 104). Elad was nonetheless recruited into the intelligence service owing to lax vetting procedures. He first traveled to Germany, where he posed as a former SS officer named Paul Frank. He apparently managed to discover how wanted Nazi war criminals were able to escape to Arab countries, as well as getting information about Egyptian efforts to recruit former Nazis to help it build an arms industry. However, Israeli intelligence later assessed that at some point Elad became a double agent.

The Ring Acts and is Caught

The group was activated in July of 1954. The first bombs were placed in post offices on July 15, followed by the USIA libraries in Cairo and Alexandria on July 14. On July 23, more bombs were exploded in two Cairo cinemas, in the railway terminal and central post office. The entire ring was soon rounded up, either because of information divulged under interrogation or because it had been betrayed. Ostensibly, they were caught when, by chance, incendiary bombs went off in the pocket of Phillip Nathanson while he was waiting in line outside the British owned Rio theater in Alexandria on July 23 (according to Melman and Haber). However, police who arrested Nathanson said they had been tipped off according to some versions.

Max (Meir) Binett (or Benett), another member of unit 131, IDF intelligence, was in Egypt on other business. He had previously been an agent in Tehran and Baghdad. In 1952 he was sent to Egypt as a German businessman. Unfortunately, Marcelle Ninio knew at least the license plate number of his automobile, though probably not his name, and either she, or Elad had given him away to the Egyptians.

As soon as the group was arrested, Moshe Dayan, then Chief of Staff of the IDF, fired Mordechai Ben Tzur, who had headed unit 131, replacing him with Major Yossi Harel (Hamburger) who was recalled from studies in the United States. Harel may be familiar to readers in another role - he was the commander of the immigrant ship, Exodus, in 1947. Harel ordered the withdrawal of all unit 131 agents operating in Arab countries from the field, until it could be ascertained that nobody was compromised by the arrests. They were only returned in 1956.

The Trial and Sentencing

The Egyptians had announced the arrest of a "13 man spy ring" on October 5, 1954 (Hirst, 1977). The trial in Egypt began on December 11. The Egyptians apparently somehow concluded that the operation was ordered by the Israeli Secretary of Defense, Pinchas Lavon, though they could not possibly have had evidence from the prisoners that proved this claim. It was nonetheless a reasonable assumption. Of the thirteen defendants, two were acquitted. Max Binnet could not risk revealing his identity as an Israeli agent and committed suicide on arrest. Yosef Carmon committed suicide in prison. . Dr. Moshe Marzouk of Cairo and Shmuel Azar of Alexandria, were sentenced to death and hanged in a Cairo prison. Marzouk claimed that he had organized the ring and took full responsibility, apparently to reduce the guilt of the others. Victor Levy and Philip Nathanson, got life sentences. .Marcelle Ninio, a woman, and Robert Dassa, were both sentenced to 15 years in jail. Meir Meyuhas and Meir Za'afra, served seven year jail sentences, were released in 1962 and made their way to Israel, where they lived in obscurity. Israel did not even try to exchange any of the prisoners for Egyptian prisoners of war after the 1956 Suez campaign. In 1968 however, following the 6 day war, they were finally released, on the insistence of Meir Amit, then head of AMAN.

Shakeups in Israel

The Israeli cabinet had not seen fit to discuss the incident at all until the trial concluded in Egypt. The Israeli press was outraged by the allegations of the Egyptians, and alleged that it was a frame up. Perhaps the truth was not brought to the attention of the cabinet immediately. The details of the affair had remained top secret for many years. However, a version of the affair had been leaked by the army to poet Nathan Alterman, who published a poem that hinted about it esoterically in his column in Davar, the Mapai party

newspaper. When the government reviewed the case after the trial, both Pinchas Lavon, who had been minister of defense, and Benjamin Gibli, who headed AMAN, resigned or were forced out. Lavon's resignation was also influenced by his tendency to order retaliatory attacks without the approval of PM [Moshe Sharett](#). Lavon was replaced by Ben Gurion, who returned from retirement in Sde Boker, and Gibli was replaced by Yehoshafat Harkavi, his deputy. Before his resignation, Gibli sent Elad back to Germany, perhaps to keep him from testifying.

An investigation led astray

A committee of two, composed of Yitzhak Olshan, president of the Supreme court, and Yaakov Dori, first IDF chief of staff, was appointed to investigate the affair. They were unable to answer the question, "who gave the order" because people involved lied systematically and forged documents.

Isser Harel, head of the Mossad and the *Sherut Bitachon Klali* (Shin Bet - the General Security Services, responsible for internal security) in the 1950s, had been suspicious of Elad, because he had gotten out of the affair unscathed. The evidence was suggestive. However, Harel had no proof and he had no real influence in AMAN, which was part of the IDF, or in unit 131. Without proof, he could do little.

In January 1955, Elad was ordered back to Israel to testify. Givli tried to travel to Germany and suborn Elad, but the plan was discovered by Dayan, who blocked the trip. Givli managed to send a message by special courier. He also met Elad at the airport and "guided" his testimony. Elad perjured himself and supported Givli's version, giving a date for the order supposedly issued by Ben Tzur that corresponded with the date given in a letter that had been forged on Givli's orders. In a book he wrote long after the event, Elad admitted he had lied on the orders of his superiors, claiming that he did it in order to save the image of the IDF. Elad's perjured testimony was probably crucial in preventing the Olshan-Dori committee from discovering who had given the order for the operation. The committee reported on January 13, 1955:

"We were not convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the head of military intelligence [Givli] did not receive the order from the Minister of Defense [Lavon]. At the same time, we are not sure that the Minister of Defense did give the order attributed to him." (Peres, pp 103-104).

Elad was apparently no longer working for military intelligence. However, returned to Germany, ostensibly to care for his father, who was very ill. At the beginning of 1956, he was ordered back to Israel and questioned again by Yossi Harel, but to no avail. Elad again returned to Germany. Apparently without getting permission from his former superiors in AMAN, Elad contacted Colonel Othman Nuri, who was deputy-commander of Egyptian intelligence.

Mole!

In 1957, David Kimche, then a junior Mossad agent, tried to recruit a former Wehrmacht intelligence officer, Robert Jensen. Kimche claimed he was working for a "European intelligence service." Jensen told Kimche that he knew that he must come from Nuri. An Egyptian agent had told him to tell Nuri that "Wagner sent him." The name of this "Egyptian agent" according to Jensen, was Paul Frank. Kimche was aghast. Paul Frank was Elad's cover name.

This information reached David Ben-Gurion, now Prime Minister again, the next day. He ordered IDF field security to investigate. Elad was an Israeli hero and had to be treated with kid gloves. Versions differ on how Elad was enticed to come back to Israel. He was offered various business deals according to Ya'akov Hefetz, who had been put in charge of the investigation. Elad claimed in his book that he returned of his own free will to find out the truth in the Lavon affair. In any event, he was invited for interrogation by IDF field security, in the company of Unit 131 commander, Yossi Harel.

Yaakov Hefetz, head of IDF field security, interrogated Elad. Microphones broadcast the interrogation to an adjacent room, where Tzvi Aharoni and Victor Cohen, Shin Bet agents, were listening in. Aharoni had been given a special appointment as a senior police officer for this mission.

Hefetz, who knew Elad well as a comrade in arms, began by saying, "Avri, I am not speaking to you now as Yankele Hefetz, your friend, but as the head of the IDF Field Security department talking to Captain Avri Seidenberg.

Elad cut him off and said, using Yiddish slang mixed with Hebrew, "Never mind the hush hush stuff and get to the point."

Hefetz said, "You do not have to respond, but what you say may be held in evidence against you. Avri, have you ever betrayed your country?"

Elad paled, according to Hefetz, and said, most amazingly, "Wait, Wait, let me think about that and remember."

This was enough for Tzvi Aharoni, who cut the interview short, entered the room and said, "I am arresting you on the grounds of suspicions I hold against you."

Elad was interrogated at length, but denied everything. Victor Cohen, who had known virtually nothing about "operation Sussanah" was amazed, and was also skeptical of Elad's version of the story. Elad had stayed in Egypt for 12 days after the arrest of the ring. He had sold his De Soto automobile. He even took the trouble to remove the bumper to reduce its tax value. He claimed that he had smuggled out of Egypt film of rockets being developed with the aid of German technicians. All this was incredible. Nonetheless, Elad was still treated with kid gloves. According to Melman and Haber, on the way to his incarceration in Ramle prison, he persuaded his guards to allow him to stop in his apartment. He arranged for a friend, Peter Landesman, to pick up a suitcase from his apartment, and to stop a shipment of personal effects on its way to Hamburg. Landesman put the freight in storage in a locker in Haifa. When he opened the suitcase, he found it was full of top-secret documents and burned them.

However, Elad gave his sister, who visited him in jail, a note for Landesman. The note was intercepted by the Shin Bet, and Landesman was interrogated and confessed to burning the documents. The freight originally destined for Hamburg contained Elad's diary, but there was nothing in it to incriminate him in betrayal of the Israeli spy ring in Egypt. Additional documents, held by his wife in Germany, disappeared.

Elad was tried in 1958 and sentenced to ten years in prison for relatively minor offences. The judges noted the strong suspicion that he had betrayed the spy ring, but his role could not be proven.

Aftershocks - Reinvestigation

Failure has no fathers. It was time to pass the buck. Ben Gurion insisted that Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon was responsible for the fiasco. Lavon insisted that Colonel Benjamin Givli, a protege of Ben Gurion and head of Aman (Military intelligence) had organized the operation behind his back. Lavon insisted on re-opening the affair. Ben Gurion appointed a committee of three members, Supreme Court Justice Haim Cohen and two army officers. However, Lavon also testified to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee. He blamed Givli and accused Givli and others of an elaborate frame-up and cover up. The testimony was leaked, causing a scandal.

Lavon claimed Ben-Gurion was persecuting him, and insisted on that his name be cleared. The cabinet

backed Lavon. A commission of inquiry consisting of 7 ministers was set up to investigate. They found that Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres forged a document, apparently the letter giving the order, to incriminate Lavon. On December 24, 1960, the Israeli cabinet unanimously exonerated Lavon of all guilt in the 'disastrous security adventure in Egypt'. According to a New York Times article (New York Times, 10 February 1961) the Attorney General had found 'conclusive evidence of forgeries as well as false testimony in an earlier inquiry'. This was most likely the testimony of Elad and Givli, and the forged letter that Givli had produced.

Ben-Gurion insisted that the committee was politically motivated, and that ministers could not be judges. In the subsequent 1961 elections, Ben-Gurion declared that he would only accept office if Lavon was fired as First Secretary of the Histadrut, Israel's labor union organization. His demands were met. Lavon was forced to resign, but his supporters organized protest demonstrations. However, in 1964 Ben Gurion claimed there was new evidence and demanded that the government reopen the investigation with a proper judicial commission. According to Shimon Peres, Ben Gurion felt that Lavon had at least ministerial overall responsibility, and that it was unjust for him to place all the blame on Givli, an army officer. However, in the absence of proof, Ben Gurion was content with the ambiguous ruling of Olshan and Drori. When Lavon insisted on exoneration however, Ben-Gurion insisted on some sort of judicial commission. At this time, there was no law regarding judicial investigations in Israel. The procedure for such investigations was established by law only in 1968, as a result of the Lavon Affair. (Peres, pp 110-111).

Ben Gurion tried to force his political party Mapai, The Israel Workers Party, to resolve this issue during 1964-1965. Instead, Ben-Gurion was forced to leave the party he had founded. The party cleared and rehabilitated Lavon completely in May 1964. Ben-Gurion founded the *Min Hayesod* faction with Shimon Peres and Moshe Dayan. This later became the Rafi party which won ten mandates, but then was reduced to four members as the Reshima Mamlachtit party after Dayan and Peres returned to the Labor party in 1967. Ben-Gurion failed to attract a significant number of votes, and retained a permanent enmity to Levy Eshkol, who had replaced him as Prime Minister. In 1967, in part because of this enmity, Ben Gurion and his supporters were able to bring about the enlargement of the Eshkol government just before the 6-Day War.

History had passed by the founder of the Israeli state because of this one affair. Ben-Gurion retired to his home in Sde Boker in the Negev, to live in relative obscurity, and influence events from the side lines through his proteges - Moshe Dayan and Shimon Peres, until they returned to the Labor party.

In the 1980s, Benjamin Givli's secretary, Dalia Goldstein, confessed to forging the letter giving the orders, supposedly sent by Ben Tzur, that had been used to incriminate Lavon. The forged letter to Elad activating the ring, was given an incorrect date. As noted, Givli had also suborned Elad to give false testimony. By that time, Ben Gurion was dead. The Labor party, partly owing to the scandal set in motion by the Lavon affair, was out of power. Elad had moved to California and written his memoirs, protesting his innocence.

Epilogue

To this day the truth about who gave the orders in the Lavon affair cannot be ascertained. We do not have all the pieces of the puzzle. Probably we never will. In the absence of real information, the Lavon affair has been fertile grounds for speculation by various interested parties, but none of the theories offered fits all the facts. For many years, Israeli leftist parties sided with Lavon against Ben-Gurion, Dayan and Peres. Peres continues to maintain his innocence, and claims that Lavon had become eccentric and held extremist anti-American and anti-western views. Rumor claims that Lavon was an alcoholic. The affair continues to

do damage to this day, because every bigot, crank and eccentric can use it to prove their favorite contention. Most recently, it has been used to "prove" that Israel engineered the Al-Qaida terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.

Qui Bono?

Curiously, the alleged motivation for the operation has not been questioned. Who could really have benefited had it been successful?

Shabtai Tevet, Ben Gurion's biographer, stated that the assignment was "To undermine Western confidence in the existing [Egyptian] regime by generating public insecurity and actions to bring about arrests, demonstrations, and acts of revenge, while totally concealing the Israeli factor. The team was accordingly urged to avoid detection, so that suspicion would fall on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Communists, 'unspecified malcontents' or 'local nationalists'." (Tevet, p. 81).

"The team was.. urged to avoid detection" is an absurd statement. Did Tevet mean to imply that otherwise, Israeli espionage teams *are* not urged to avoid detection? Of course it is a good idea to avoid detection if you are Israeli agents blowing up public and foreign facilities in an Arab country. The team would hardly need urging on that score. But if secrecy was of the essence, why wasn't the operation compartmentalized? Why weren't team members taught to resist torture? These techniques were certainly known to the Israeli intelligence establishment, and had been used in the preparation of paratroopers sent behind Nazi lines in WW II.

On examination, the motives offered are far-fetched. The ostensible purpose was to prevent the withdrawal of British occupying forces from Suez, which would supposedly leave Israeli defenses naked to Egyptian attack. Firstly, the British were in no position to stop an Egyptian attack with their small occupation force. Secondly, if, as often claimed, the affair was the work of the Israeli activist faction, it made no sense. The activists wanted decisive action against Egypt. This was not possible as long as the British were in Suez, in close proximity to Sinai and defending the canal. With the British gone, and no longer committed to defense of Egypt and the canal, the way became open to contemplate a large scale military operation such as the Sinai campaign.

The possible gains from the bombings carried out by this group would in any case have been minor. There is no reason to assume the US would necessarily have blamed the Egyptian government for activities of opposition as some claim (See for example, Hirst, 1977). On the contrary, Nasser could claim he was carrying out a pro-Western policy against the wishes of the opposition, and that removal of British troops was needed to satisfy anti-Western sentiment. The British pullout was not dependent on the stability of the Egyptian regime. Egypt had just undergone a revolution that was not quite completed, and was known to be unstable anyway. It is a fact that several of the bombs were in fact set off, but American and British policy were totally unaffected. In all, it is extremely doubtful if the operation would have accomplished anything even if the ring had not been caught. Even had they been convinced that Nasser's regime was unstable, the US and Britain tend to prop up their unstable allies, not abandon them. That could have been easily foreseen. Why then, would Israel risk the safety of Egyptian Jews, its relations with the US and Britain and its agents? The argument that Lavon was a scapegoat of "activists" who wanted him out of the way so that they could perform more reprisal raids doesn't make sense either, because Lavon was apparently an extreme hawk.

If Givli acted on the orders of Dayan in forging the letter, then why did Dayan try to stop him from coordinating testimony with Elad, as Melman and Haber claim? If Givli acted on his own, or if in reality Lavon had given the order, what were their motivations? Is it possible that Givli was somehow involved with Elad's activities as a double agent, that Elad was indeed trying to raise money for his sick father, but

selling real secrets instead of fake ones as he claimed? Givli might have been sharing profits with Elad, and may have seen the need to cover his tracks. A foreign power who knew about the ring may have induced Elad or Givli to activate it in order to embarrass Israel or to cause an Egyptian rift with the west, or to provide Egypt for an excuse for stepping up infiltration against Israel. All of these were in fact direct or indirect consequences of the fiasco, and they could have been easily foreseen, especially since whoever instigated it knew about the ring. Given the contempt of Israeli intelligence for Arab intelligence services, and their false sense of security regarding foreign penetration in general, it is doubtful that this possibility was ever investigated. Given the number of espionage fiascos due to penetration by foreign agents in those years, it is a possibility that should have been investigated.

Ami Isseroff

Sources

Hirst, David, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, 1977.

Melman, Yossi and Haber, Eitan, *The Spies: Israel's Counter Espionage Wars (Hameraglim: Parashot Rigul Bimdinat Yisrael)*, Miskal - Yediot Ahronot and Chemed Books, Tel-Aviv, 2002, pp 33-50. (Hebrew only)

Peres, Shimon, *Battling for Peace*, Orion, 1995, pp 98-115.

Tevet, S. Ben-Gurion's Spy, Columbia University Press, 1996.

DONATIONS TO MidEastWeb

If you like what we do - Please help us! USA Credit Card -
Donate On-Line - Help
us live and grow

MidEastWeb is a registered Non-Profit Association

Notice - Copyright

Copyright 2003, by MidEastWeb for Coexistence

All original materials at MidEastWeb are copyright. Please tell your friends about MidEastWeb. Please forward these materials in e-mails to friends and link to this URL - <http://www.mideastweb.org>. You can print out materials for your own use or classroom use, giving the URL of MidEastWeb, without asking our explicit permission. Printed material should bear this notice:

Please do not copy materials from this Web site to your Web site. Reproduction in any other form - by permission only. [Consult detailed terms of use and copyright information](#)

The Lavon Affair

By Doron Geller

Two people, Yosef Carmon and Max (Meir) Binnet, committed suicide in prison due to the brutal interrogation methods of the Egyptian police. Two more, Dr. Moshe Marzouk of Cairo and Shmuel Azar of Alexandria, were sentenced to death and hanged in a Cairo prison. Israel glorified them as martyrs. Their memory was sanctified. Neighborhoods and gardens were named after them in Israel, as were dozens of children born in the year 1955. At the same time it was not publicly conceded that they died in the service of Israel. The other six heroes of the "Esek HaBish" were far less prominently known. They were sentenced to long jail terms, where they languished for years. Two of them, Meir Meyuhas and Meir Za'afra, were released in 1962, after having served seven year jail sentences. Shrouded in secrecy, they reached Israel where their arrival was not made public, and journalists were not allowed to interview them. Sworn to silence, they reconstructed their lives to the best of their ability, far from the spotlight.

That left four more "Zionist spies," as they came to be called in Egypt. Marcelle Ninio, a woman, and Robert Dassa, both sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment, and Victor Levy and Philip Nathanson, who were sentenced for life. Marcelle Ninio was kept on her own in the women's prison in Kanather. The men were jailed together for fourteen years, mainly in the Tura prison.

Why would such young Jews risk their lives for an Arab country in which they were born, for a country - Israel - which until 1952 they had never seen? And why would Israel decide to open up a cell of native Jews to spy for them?

For Israel, sources of information were drying up in Egypt after the War of Independence of 1948. Perhaps more than half of Egypt's approximately 80,000 Jews had left for Israel by mid-1950. Egyptian Muslims were more openly hostile and distrustful of those Jews who remained, which led many Jews to sever any connection they had with Israel. Israel thus needed sources of information. More than that, by the early 1950's Egyptian nationalist agitation against the British presence in Egypt and especially in the Suez Canal Zone was intensifying. Britain was speaking openly about leaving Egypt as she had from Palestine a few years before, in 1948. British troops in the Canal Zone were living in similar conditions to those in Palestine by the end of the Mandate - behind barbed wire in protected zones.

At a farewell party for the small number of Egyptian Jews who participated in the course, they decided to call what they would be called upon to do "Operation Susannah." It was partly in jest, named after Victor Levy's fiancée, whose name was Susan Kauffman. She went with him to Israel and stayed. The spies were to return to Egypt, and they would know when to go into action when they would hear an Israel radio broadcast of the American song "Oh! Susannah."

Victor Levy left for Egypt in August 1952. On the way back to Egypt he first stopped off in Paris and then other locations in France in order to learn more about manufacturing explosives and some photography.

An Israeli agent by the name of Avraham Seidenberg was sent to take over the organization of the spy ring from his predecessor, Avraham Dar. Seidenberg was a good choice for such a dangerous mission - taking into account that he was an Israeli unlike the Egyptian Jews, and thus had more of a chance of his cover being blown. Yet he had little to lose. He had been caught looting Arab property during Israel's War of Independence and had never been able to rehabilitate himself in public life. His marriage, too, was on the rocks, and thus he was quite happy to be offered something that could lead to new vistas and opportunities.

Seidenberg was first sent to Germany to establish a false identity as a former SS officer by the name of

Paul Frank. He successfully infiltrated the ranks of the underground former Nazi network. He set out for Egypt in early 1954, his new identity established. "He chalked up a number of successes, uncovering the underground route by which wanted Nazi war criminals slipped through to the Arab states, as well as supplying the first reports about Egyptian efforts to establish an arms industry with the help of German experts." Once he arrived in Egypt he began recruiting further members of the Egyptian Jewish community. Marcelle Ninio was one of those who were captivated by his show of confidence and by the fact that he was an Israeli. The other members of the cell - who all knew each other, which was an unfortunate portent and a major mistake in terms of organizing espionage operations - agreed to work for him as well. On July 2, 1954, they went into action. They first blew up some post offices and a few days later, the American libraries in Cairo and Alexandria. These operations were to "make it clear to the whole world that Egypt's new rulers were nothing but a group of foolhardy extremists, unreliable and unworthy of taking charge of an asset as important as the Suez Canal. Furthermore, it was to be demonstrated that their grasp on power was uncertain, that they faced powerful internal opposition, and, consequently, they were unworthy of being counted upon as a dependable ally."

Robert Dassa was one of the first of the spies to be caught. Philip Nathanson was caught soon after when, on the way to blow up a cinema in Alexandria, the bomb he was carrying in his pocket ignited and then exploded. What was a particularly alarming factor was that outside of the theater a fire engine was waiting, as if expecting them. Philip had the distinct feeling he was being watched. It turned out that he had been.

As Philip lay on the ground, he saw startled and frightened faces looking down at him. While somebody shouted "Take care! He may have another bomb!" Philip heard a police sergeant say "Don't worry, don't worry. We were waiting for them. These are the people who set fire to the American library." He was taken by ambulance to a hospital. After being lightly treated, he was interrogated by members of Egypt's military intelligence, the Muhabarrat. The others were caught soon after - Shmuel Azar, Philip Nathanson, Robert Dassa, and Marcelle Ninio. None of them had been prepared by their Israeli handlers for this eventuality.

They refused to implicate one another. At first, they didn't even admit to the bombings. When the police brought Philip Nathanson to his house with incriminating material, which were sure to implicate him, Philip continued to maintain that he was innocent of all charges. As he recalls being brought to his house; "The house was overflowing with policemen and detectives in and out of uniform. They took me straight to the garden, and to the workshop in the garden hut. This too was so crowded there was no room for me, and I remained standing on the threshold? The policemen had piled the table with Vim cans, chemicals, and the fine scales I used for weighing them. With each item they found, they asked me: 'What's this? What's it for?'"

'I told them I was manufacturing dyes.'

'Sure,' said the governor sarcastically. 'There's a good market for them, praise be to Allah.'"

The police took everything they could from his house, even a fork and a spoon, to be used as evidence against them. Victor Levy, Robert Dassa and Philip Nathanson held up to the persistent questioning, threats, and occasional beatings. They maintained that they were Communists who wanted the British imperialists out of Egypt. This even earned them the admiration and respect from the Egyptians, who also wanted the British out. That is, until Shmuel Azar, who was constitutionally incapable of telling a lie, admitted that they were Jews and Zionists working on behalf of the State of Israel. Thereafter, the whole network was rounded up and arrested by August 5, 1954. "Paul Frank", or Avraham Seidenberg (Avri Gilad) , meanwhile, did nothing, and left Egypt only on August 5, when Meir Meyuhas and Moshe Marzouk were arrested.

In Israel, Seidenberg got a hero's welcome as the only member of the network who had gotten away. Meanwhile, Marcelle Ninio waited nervously, not knowing what to do, wishing to leave, but unable to do so.

Seidenberg never got back in contact with her, and in fact appeared to be very relaxed about the whole ordeal. He had even encouraged the Egyptian Jews to stay put before they were arrested. It was only years later that they began to question Seidenberg's role in the story. Israeli Intelligence began to suspect him much earlier.

The "Zionist spies," as they came to be called, hadn't been well treated before they admitted they had been working on behalf of Israel. But it was bearable. That all changed after their association with Israel was known. Marcelle Ninio was arrested and beaten mercilessly on the soles of her feet, she was threatened with sexual abuse, and it didn't let up. The torture became so unbearable that at one point she threw herself out of a window and nearly died. She only just managed to survive. She was taken to a hospital where she was allowed to heal.

The men were transferred from Alexandria to Cairo, where the prison guards were known to be even more savage than their Alexandrian counterparts. They were taken to the Sigan Harbi, a prison notorious for its cruelty - a reputation the guards there very much wanted to maintain. When they were marched down the stinking and decrepit hallways, in chains, they could hear cries coming out of the other cells. In the near future those cries would sometimes be of their friends. This went on day and night. Treatment was something akin to a medieval torture chamber. Moreover, there were rivalries between the police and prison guards on the one side, and the Muhabarrat (military intelligence) on the other. Both sides wanted to prove that they could extract more information than the other.

The prison guards would sometimes hang the prisoners up with their arms tied behind their heads, and beat the prisoners savagely until they fainted, and sometimes even died. The truth is that this treatment was not only meted out to the Jewish spies - Egyptian members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who were fierce opponents of Nasser's secular, socialist, military regime - received exactly the same treatment, and sometimes even worse. At one point one of the higher level prison guards, after savagely beating a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, called in Robert Dassa. The guard told him to beat the Moslem Brother. "Now, I am going to let a Jew beat you."

Robert refused. The Moslem Brotherhood member's eyes, cringing with fear, softened a little. The guards turned on Robbie savagely and told him to beat the prisoner or else. He wouldn't. A gang of guards then set upon Robbie, savagely beating him, while the Moslem Brother pleaded with the guards to stop beating Robbie. As long as he could, Robbie stoically refused to cry out and give the guards any kind of satisfaction.

After months of this kind of treatment they were finally brought to trial. The verdict was predetermined from the start, a fact which was known as long ago as 1956. The sentences were a compromise between the extremists of the new government, who wanted all of the spies put to death, and those more moderate members of the government, "who preferred to win the world's sympathy for their regime by a more humane approach. This is confirmed by the court's presiding judge, Gen. Fuad el Digwi, when he fell into Israeli captivity during the 1956 campaign. At the time he was the military governor of the Gaza Strip. He told his interrogators: 'The verdict was dictated to me by my supervisors, who decided how many were to be sentenced to death, how many to imprisonment, and for what terms.'"

The trial went on for two weeks. As a show trial, it was staged for two purposes. "Abroad, it was to stress the story that 'Israel tried to undermine Egyptian-American friendship'; at home, it would show that the regime's severity was not confined to the Moslem Brotherhood alone." As we discussed above, the Nasser regime treated the Moslem Brothers as badly as the Jewish spies.

The trial was given "unusual publicity." The press emphasized again and again how dangerous the 'Israeli' spies were to Egypt, and demanded severe punishment. Naturally, the press pronounced the Jews guilty

before the court did. Such intensive and ongoing press coverage had a deeply demoralizing effect on the families of the imprisoned Jewish spies. In court, however, they showed smiles of encouragement from the spectators' gallery, as did the spies themselves. Marcelle Ninio was completely healed by then - it is unlikely they would have permitted her to be shown to the outside world in any other way.

Moshe Marzouk publicly took responsibility for the group and everything that they had done. The presiding Military Judge, General Digwi was taken aback by the admission. On only one point did Moshe concede to his companions' pleas not to reveal more about their activities; and that was not to admit that they had undergone military training in Israel.

After the trial the men were transferred to Tura Prison. Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar were sentenced to be hanged. Massive world pressure was applied on the Egyptian Government not to hang the two condemned men. American President Eisenhower intervened, as did the Indian President Nehru - and even the Pope. The Egyptians, aware of the American hangings of the Rosenbergs, Jewish Americans who had spied on behalf of the Soviet Union, responded; "Egypt (will) treat its spies in precisely the same manner adopted by the United States." Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar were hanged in early 1955.

Marcelle Ninio was sentenced to 15 years in the women's prison of Kanather - the longest sentence ever for a women political prisoner in Egypt. The previous high had been 8 years.

After the hangings of Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar, relations between Egypt and Israel considerably worsened. Palestinian infiltration from Gaza into Israel, with Egyptian connivance, considerably increased, as did Israeli retaliatory raids. Border tensions were reflected in the prison. The Egyptian guards frequently incited the Moslem prisoners against their fellow Jewish prisoners. When the prisoners were sent out to the quarries to undergo grueling, back-breaking labor cutting and hauling rocks, the "Zionist spies" were under constant threat of falling rocks loosened by ill-intentioned fellow prisoners. The Jews did have an advantage, however; Robbie was known in their old prison (the Sigan Harbi), as someone who had helped the Moslem Brothers who had been tortured by the prison authorities. They saw that he refused to beat a fellow prisoner and had been beaten in return. He also helped many other prisoners beaten so badly that they could hardly walk to get back and forth to the bathroom when they needed to.

In theory, while the Moslem Brothers should have hated Robbie and his fellow Jewish prisoners, they recognized what he had done for them. When he was transferred to Tura, word was passed that Robert had helped the Moslem Brotherhood, and that henceforth he was to be treated as one of them. In fact, Robert and the other Jewish prisoners formed friendships with men whom, on the outside, they would have been bitter enemies with.

It is almost touching to see how the Jewish prisoners, in jail, formed relations with other prisoners who were fully aware of the fact that they had been caught and sentenced for spying for Israel. Although tensions heated up during the [1956 war](#), after it many Moslem guards and prisoners told the Jewish prisoners that they had every reason to be released in a prisoner exchange, and wished them the best.

It seemed logical that they would be released; Israel held 5000 Egyptian prisoners after her conquest of the Sinai. But they traded them all back for one Israeli pilot. Israel didn't even ask for the spies. It is not clear why this was the case. Either Israel did not want to ask, and thereby admit their involvement in the affair (which could have endangered Israel's relations with the United States); or else the Israelis simply didn't want to get involved. Many of the Israelis originally involved in the "Lavon Affair" or "Esek HaBish" had been forced out of office and no longer wanted anything to do with it. They didn't raise their voices in protest over the abandonment of the spies; they simply didn't bring the subject up. Whatever the case, the spies continued to languish in prison, long after the last of the Egyptian prisoners returned home.

One person who became convinced that something had gone amiss, and that people in Israel were to blame - was David Ben-Gurion. In a Commission of Inquiry into the Affair published in December 1960, Pinhas Lavon, (the Defense Minister at the time of the capture of the spies in 1954) was declared not guilty of authorizing the operation. All the ministers in Ben-Gurion's accepted this ruling except for Ben-Gurion himself. A bitter debate ensued which subsequently went on for years. But by then most of those involved in the affair had been removed from their posts. Motke Ben-Tzur, head of a section of Military Intelligence in 1954, had been dismissed in October of that year. Pinhas Lavon resigned from the post of Defense Minister on January 2, 1955. Binyamin Gibli, the Director of military Intelligence, was replaced as well.

The only man to emerge unscathed was Avraham Seidenberg, alias "Paul Frank," alias "Robert", who was subsequently referred to in Israel as "the Third Man". He had given the order to the cell to act - and he was the only one who escaped. As we saw, he returned to a hero's welcome in Israel, his role in the affair unquestioned at the time. Israeli Intelligence even sent him on another mission to Germany.

Isser Harel served as head of the Shin Bet and the Mossad from 1952-1963. He became a giant in early Israeli intelligence, responsible for the capture of Adolph Eichmann and many other operations, as we shall see in a few weeks. Isser Harel was known to act on his instincts - which often proved him correct. He began to suspect Seidenberg. He ordered Seidenberg back from Germany, and then removed him from Intelligence in October 1956. But Seidenberg was still not arrested or even accused of anything at the time.

To soften the blow, Seidenberg was asked to write reports on his activities in Egypt and Germany. He was given access to archives, and years later, it was discovered that he took some of the top-secret documents he then had access to. He served a short prison term, but after his discharge, his father in Austria became ill and Avraham Seidenberg went to visit him. In fact he went several times. He was, however, forbidden from entering Germany. He went anyway, and he made contact with Nuri Otman, an Egyptian. Seidenberg let it be known that he was prepared to sell important information to Egypt for a sizable payment.

Isser Harel started checking on Seidenberg. He confirmed that Seidenberg was not authorized to go to Germany or to make contact with a foreign agent. "'We came to the conclusion' said Harel, 'that his unlawful contacts with Nuri Otman - as deputy commander of military intelligence and head of the Egyptian Army's security services - had been in direct charge of investigating the activities of the 'Zionist network' in 1954.'" This meant that Seidenberg might very well have been a double agent working for Egypt as well as Israel. By implication this meant that he might have turned over the Jewish spy network to his Egyptian handlers, and permitted them to be caught and then jailed while he got away.

Isser Harel tricked Seidenberg to come back to Israel by offering him a nice position business-wise, while maintaining a connection with Intelligence. Seidenberg did come back to Israel at the end of 1957.

A senior Intelligence officer interviewed Seidenberg about a new position, while two other senior Intelligence officers concealed themselves "in the neighboring room with the door slightly ajar when Avraham Seidenberg settled in his chair, the interviewing officer presented the first question: 'Tell me, Avry, could you swear by everything holy that you have never spied against the state of Israel?'

Avry hesitated for a brief moment before launching on his predictable string of denials. That moment sealed his fate." Under interrogation he denied everything. Many investigative committees were appointed. They concluded that not only had he committed perjury, but that the heads of Intelligence services had induced witnesses such as Seidenberg to commit perjury, they had lied themselves and had committed forgeries in 1954.

Investigations in his home turned up bundles of illegal, highly sensitive intelligence material. He went on trial for that and was convicted. (Nevertheless, a committee was unable to find sufficient legal material to

try Seidenberg for betraying his colleagues to the Egyptian police in 1954). He claimed that the whole Intelligence Services was conspiring against him and only he was telling the truth. The court did not accept that and he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

After serving his ten years as an exemplary prisoner, he was released, and briefly sold television sets in Tel-Aviv before emigrating to California in 1972, still denying everything.

All of the political rumblings were reported in the Egyptian press. From there the news filtered down to the prison. Guards and prisoners once again became hostile to them. This treatment did not last long as they went on an 11-day hunger strike, which led to better treatment. In general, they were well liked and respected, even in those tense times, by the rest of the guards and prisoners.

They had many skills that they put to good use in prison - such as photography, gardening, painting, playing basketball - and raising animals. When one of the guards saw one of Robert's paintings, he wanted one. Soon enough all the other guards did as well. In return, they would do favors for him. When they saw Victor or Philip gardening, they wanted gardens in front of their own workplaces as well. It is rather bizarre, knowing of the often vicious nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that one finds the status of the Jewish spies so high in Egyptian prisons. Their raising of ducks and parakeets within the prison particularly impressed the prison administration.

The duck farm was a rather amusing story in itself. Once one of the ducks began hatching eggs, they decided to ask the notoriously cruel administrator to give them an incubator. The Mudir (administrator), Immara - was enthusiastic about the project. Victor gave him a mother and three little ducks, and Immara would go every day "to feast his eyes on them." Moreover, he supported Victor's project wholeheartedly. "Anything I requested for the ducklings was provided. No sooner did I see that a rearing house was needed than carpenters were summoned and the structure went up before my very eyes. Two convicts were placed at my disposal, to grind up the food scraps from the kitchen. When the ducklings grew feathers and their time came to leave the rearing house, Immara ordered the orchestra to vacate the two rooms behind the amphitheater where it used to hold rehearsals. The rooms were converted into duck runs." Victor continued: "After a year or two, the duck farm ran the whole length of the prison wall." There was a school building attached to the prison, but "Immara ordered the pupils out and placed three of the classrooms at my disposal, to serve as rearing-rooms, this time, equipped with electric stoves. The incubator hut was now fitted out with three up-to-date incubators operating simultaneously. The kitchen scraps no longer sufficed, but Immara did not hesitate to requisition the convicts' bran to feed the ducks."

Immara was a very strange character. The spies knew him from another prison, ten years before, where he had been notoriously brutal, savage and cruel to the prisoners. When he came to Tura he was determined to prove himself again. He took away the accumulated belongings most prisoners had accrued in their cells. When he first arrived at Tura and saw the spies' cell, he smiled, asked how they were, didn't seem bothered by the birds twittering around in their cell, and moved on. He didn't conduct a search or confiscate a thing.

Soon after he made everyone vacate their cells and move into new ones with the exception of the Jews. Other prisoners questioned his behavior. The Jews didn't know what to make of him themselves. For a long time they assumed he showed favoritism to them because they acquired Swiss medicines for him from the outside, which were unavailable in Egypt. But this was not the only reason. "Only years later, on the eve of his release, when Victor went to Immara to say good-bye, did the Mudir reveal a further reason for the change in his attitude towards them. His brother-in-law, while serving as an army doctor at El Arish, had been taken prisoner during the Sinai campaign, and was treated well by the Israelis. 'To this day, he tells me how well your people behaved toward him.' Immara took it upon himself to repay in kind."

Immara grew to have complete confidence in Victor in particular, mainly because of the duck farm. "Matters reached such a point that even guards punished by the Mudir for some offense would plead with Victor: 'He docked me ten days' pay and I don't have enough to feed my children as it is. Please, do something for me.'" With Robert Dassa running the prison basketball team, Victor in charge of gardening and the duck farm and gardening, and Philip Nathanson holding several important posts, they all "enjoyed a position of exclusivity, with considerable freedom of movement." Their renown extended far outside the prison walls. "In Cairo's Sigan Misr, which served as a transit station for prisoners sentenced to hard labor, old lags would advise (new) prisoners on their way to Tura: 'When you get there, try to contact the three Jewish spies. They're the mukhtars (headmen) of the prison. If they want to, they can be of great help to you.'" It brings to mind the story of Joseph, thrown into Pharaoh's dungeons, rising to become the headmen of his prison in Egypt more than 3000 years before.

Comparatively, Marcelle Ninio did well for herself as well. People who liked her supplied her with a radio and books. She obtained writing paper and envelopes and tried her best to keep in contact with the males in the Tura prison. She also made some real friends in the prison, particularly among the nurses.

Near the end of their imprisonment the Israeli spy Wolfgang Lotz was thrown into Tura with them as well. Everyone, including the Jew, thought he was a German who had spied on behalf of Israel. After he revealed the truth to them, they took him into their inner circle, as they had done with a select group of other prisoners. Lutz, even though he had been convicted of spying for Israel, won over the guards and prisoners at Tura, just as Robert, Victor, and Philip had.

As tensions increased during the countdown to the [1967 war](#), there were rumors that the Jewish prisoners might be harmed. Immara made sure that didn't happen.

Israel achieved a tremendous victory in 1967. This time, Israel didn't forget her spies. Although it took months, they were finally released in February 1968. The prison guards, administration, and even many of the prisoners wished them well. They all built new lives for themselves in Israel - albeit quietly, with little fanfare. It was only some time after President Nasser's death in 1970 that the Jewish spies came forth publicly to tell their story.

Bibliography

- 1). Ian Black and Benny Morris - [Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services](#)
- 2). Aviezer Golan - [Operation Susannah](#)
- 3). Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman - [Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community](#)

Source: [The Pedagogic Center](#), [The Department for Jewish Zionist Education](#), [The Jewish Agency for Israel](#), (c) 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, Director: Dr. Motti Friedman, Webmaster: Esther Carciente